

Prophetic Zithers in Classical Japanese Literature

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper

Japan's oldest literature, "Kojiki" of 712 AD and other classics such as "NihonShoki" of 720 AD, and "Fudoki" of 713 AD, described evidence of the "koto", or Japanese harps. This paper concentrates on the musical instrument, the "koto". The "koto" is a kind of string instrument, or zither, which originated in the prehistoric "Jomon"-period. One of the theories of the origin of the "koto" is the hunting bow. The bow itself functioned to exorcize evils. The aim of this paper is to document the legends of the "Koto" from the "Kojiki".

The "Koto's" purpose

There are five uses of the "koto": 1) to call down a holy spirit, 2) for religious or magical use to stop natural disasters (such as earthquakes or storms), 3) to resolve political situations, 4) for artistic use as a musical instrument, and 5) as a subject of literature. In the first two uses, a Priest would have been playing the "koto".

First, the "koto" was used mystical religious purposes; then it was used to settle political problems. Finally, it became an artistic and literary form. Therefore, the art was derived from the religion.

2. Karano "koto"

In one of the stories about the "koto", there was a boat which traveled through a strait between Awaji Island and Kishu. The boat was made from the huse tree and could sail faster than any other. After the boat became old, it was burned to produce salt, and from the remains of the burned lumber, a "koto" was made and named the "Karano" koto. To praise the "koto" a poem was composed. This poem is translated into modern Japanese as follows:

The music of the "koto" sounded as though the seaweeds are
ringing with a beautiful rustling tone - "saya, saya".

I have a different interpretation to this. I believe that it should be:

The music of "koto" calmed down the rough stormy wave and made the seaweed
sound with a beautiful quiet tone - "saya saya".

The real meaning of the poem is that the koto can control nature conditions (phenomena). The reason why the "koto" had the magical power is that the "koto" was made of burned lumber, and the lumber was a part of the wooden ship that carried water for the Emperor; and this ship was made from a huge tree that had a shadow which covered vast territories. It is believed that the huge tall tree received the

holy spirit from heaven and possessed sacred power.

“Kojiki” describes that the Emperor played “koto” and sang the poem. This justifies that Emperor’s governing power has divine authority and covers vast territories. Anyhow, the musical instrument, “koto”, was a symbolical object that can control nature and even calm down high TSUNAMI.

Fishermen and divers on Awaji Island believed that playing the “koto” roughly made the seas angry and caused a TSUNAMI; playing the “koto” softly peacefully calmed the sea. The above-mentioned legend was originally a fisherman’s tradition, and the person who played the “koto” and sang a poem must have been a priest. The Emperor in that period also was a priest - hood.

3. “Koto” music calmed the Emperor’s wrath

Angered by the misconception that a carpenter had raped one of the harem girls, the Emperor tried to have the carpenter put to death. In an attempt to win clemency for the carpenter, a minister played the “koto” and sang a song about the carpenter wanting a long life and pledging eternal service to the Emperor. Then the Emperor permitted him to live and serve.

4. The “koto” causes earthquakes

In the book, “Kojiki”, there is a myth of “Okuninushi no mikoto” who visited the god of the underground kingdom, and also of how the music of a “koto” caused an earthquake. This “prophetic koto” emits such a loud sound that when it touches the trees, it is said that the ground begins to quake.

5. The “koto” calls down the holy spirit

The “Kojiki” describes the following story. In order to decide a political matter, the Emperor asked god’s will. He played a “koto” in the holy room and then the holy spirit was lured down by its sound; and the Empress “Jingu” was possessed by the holy spirit and bestowed a prophecy. The Minister judge, “Sukune Takenouchi”, interpreted the prophecy. The Emperor did not trust this and denied the Empress’ prophecy; and for that evil attitude the Emperor had to die suddenly. Empress “Jingu” was considered a shaman-ruler.

6. Rhetorical praise for a lover

Further, the “koto’s” mystic use is used to create a rhetoric glorifying one’s lover. “Nihon Shoki’s” Emperor. “Buretsu” sang a love song about falling in love.

Come closer to the head of my “koto”, Shadow Princess, you are like a pearl-is my favorite metaphor.

The “koto’s” mysticism converted into a love song that was influenced by mysterious feminine beauty.

7. The “koto” that summons my wife’s image

Next, a love song from “Manyosū” (the collection of Ancient Poetry), when played-on a “koto”, summons forth the image of one’s wife’s face, so it can be speculated that their wife is caged in “the

koto's chamber".

"First they lament picking up the "koto". Is it possible that the "koto's" chamber cages my wife?"

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the prophecy must have been refined over time and developed into mythological literature. The reason that the "koto" acquired its divine power was that koto music has reached perfection.

Even though the "koto's" physical characteristics are not as important, but as for the playing of the instrument and its musical sounds, it has developed important factors for religious rituals. Therefore, it can be said that religious rituals gave birth to the art of "koto": music and literature.